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The Latin American Voter

By

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Main Findings:

- *The Latin American Voter* has just been published by the University of Michigan Press
- The volume contains contributions by a set of 20 experts in various facets of voter choice
- Collectively, we find voters in the region tend toward selecting candidates based on social, demographic, economic cleavages; policy and left-right stances; partisan identifications; and evaluations of and experiences with government performance
- Yet, the tendency for citizens to decide to turn out to vote and select candidates based on factors other than charisma and clientelism is greater to the degree that the party system and behavior of elites within it combine to create electoral options that are substantively meaningful, clear, and coherent

About two-thirds of the electorate votes in a typical Latin American national election (Carlin and Love 2015). Since the 1970s, the region has witnessed more than three hundred presidential and legislative elections. While not all elections are flawless, these facts nonetheless speak to the diffusion and durability of democratic processes in the region. But what factors determine who turns out to vote and for which political option?

We offer a comprehensive answer to that question in a newly-released volume – *The Latin American Voter: Pursuing Representation and Accountability in Challenging Contexts* – published in August 2015 by the University of Michigan Press.

We find that the average Latin American voter is motivated to go to the polls and select officials on the basis of demographic group membership (class, religion, gender, and ethnicity); substantive political connections (partisanship, left-right stances, and policy preferences); and political outputs related to the economy, corruption, and crime. However, the extent to which these baseline propensities manifest in a given country at a given time depends critically on the nature of the substance (the specific cleavages, campaigns, and performance) and structure (e.g., party system fragmentation and polarization) that characterize the political environment.

In this *Insights* report we borrow liberally from our discussions in *The Latin American Voter* to highlight some of its key findings. The majority of the analyses in the volume are based on data from LAPOP’s AmericasBarometer project. The volume thus demonstrates the project’s value for understanding the dynamics of elections in the Americas.

Sociodemographic Factors and the Latin American Voter

With respect to socioeconomic, demographic, and other descriptive factors, our results suggest

THE LATIN AMERICAN VOTER

PURSUING REPRESENTATION
and ACCOUNTABILITY in
CHALLENGING CONTEXTS

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the average Latin American voter is more likely to vote for a left-leaning candidate to the degree that the voter is:

- less wealthy
- someone less-inclined to attend church or to be religious
- male
- indigenous

Within the volume, our contributing authors look at class, religion, gender, and ethnicity in detail. Some of their conclusions include the following. First, class voting is more prevalent in Latin America today than in previous decades, an outcome that may be driven by the rise of the left in contemporary Latin America, making this cleavage salient (Mainwaring, Torcal, and Somma 2015). Second, Protestants are somewhat more likely to support a non-Catholic (i.e., Protestant or explicitly secular) candidate over a Catholic one (Boas and Smith 2015). Third, though indigenous and mestizos are, on average, more supportive of left-leaning

candidates than whites, this result is driven by a handful of cases in which ethnicity is particularly salient; in most cases ethnicity is not a major voting divide after controlling for class (Moreno 2015). Fourth, though female voters in Latin America exhibit a slight tendency to support conservative (right-leaning) candidates, this is less true among financially independent women; moreover, women voters also tend to support female presidential candidates (Morgan 2015). Fifth, religion and gender are more likely to emerge as salient cleavages in countries where parties offer distinct programmatic profiles.

The majority of The Latin American Voter's analyses are based on data from LAPOP's AmericasBarometer.

Thus, voting in the Latin American region does not revolve *only* around personalities and clientelism. In fact, while present to varying degrees across countries, clientelism tends to be an inefficient strategy for politicians in the region (Kitschelt and Altamirano 2015). At the same time, Latin American voters are more likely to select political candidates on the basis of policy and left-right stances to the degree that

the party system is polarized enough to allow citizens to perceive clear differences between parties (Baker and Greene 2015; Zechmeister 2015).

Policies, Ideology, Partisanship, and the Latin American Voter

Turning to factors related to policies, ideology, and partisanship, we find that on average across Latin America:

- Voters who select candidates on the right tend to prefer a small economic role for government, want tougher anticrime policies, disapprove of same-sex marriage, and trust the United States far more.
- Left-right identifications often predict voter choices.
- Partisans are more likely to support candidates from their own parties (Lupu 2015).

Performance Factors and the Latin American Voter

While making vote decisions on the basis of policy and ideology requires a moderate level of sophistication, it is typically easier for voters to decide whether to support or reject the incumbent based on performance. With respect to evaluations and experiences, on average across the Latin American region:

- Support for the incumbent is higher among those who perceive that the national economy recently has strengthened.
- Individuals who perceive high levels of corruption in the government and corruption victims are less likely to support the incumbent.
- Support for the incumbent is lower among those who feel less safe in their neighborhood.

In other words, there is a tendency in Latin America – as in other democracies around the world – for voters to use the ballot to hold politicians accountable for outcomes on their watch. If voters perceive a weak economy (Gélineau and Singer 2015), widespread corruption among political officials (Manzetti and Rosas 2015), or high levels of insecurity (Pérez 2015), they are likely to vote against the president’s party while they generally reward politicians for improvements in these areas.

The Importance of Context

Latin American party systems differ significantly from each other in ways that have important consequences for voter behavior. When we look at the region, on average, the evidence points to an electorate seeking out meaningful representation and accountability. *However*, its capacity to do so is significantly determined by the structure and content of the political environment. Thus, for example, even the most straightforward of assessments of the quality of life under the incumbent are more likely to become relevant factors in voters’ decisions to the degree that the president’s party has control over the policymaking process (and is therefore more clearly identified as responsible for output) and, in the case of the economy, parties stake out distinct stances on issues. Party system polarization is also associated with voters being more likely to link their demographic characteristics, issue positions, and left-right self-identification to their vote choice, with an increased likelihood of voters self-identifying with a political party, and with a higher likelihood to turnout in the first place.

The contributors to *The Latin American Voter* thus illustrate some of the ways in which the nature of the party system and the behavior of political elites can either facilitate or curtail voter decision-making on the basis of substantively important, programmatic factors. This matters, because it means that elites play a key role in enabling citizens’ search for representation and

accountability. To the degree that parties and politicians offer clear, coherent, and distinct programmatic options to citizens, voters are enabled in their search for representation and accountability, and personalities and vote buying tactics are less likely to hold sway.

Conclusion

Creating a coherent programmatic environment for political competition in Latin America is not an easy task for elites in much of the region. Authoritarian interruptions and high levels of electoral volatility steal away the time needed for programmatic party competition to take root and endure. Building, diffusing, and maintaining a programmatic agenda requires a high level of commitment, buoyed by the encouragement and support for all actors who have a stake in democracy in the region. *The Latin American Voter* makes the case that the public is frequently willing, and able, to do its part in pursuing representation and accountability, yet also constrained to the degree that party competition fails to create an electoral environment that is rich in issues and in clarity.

The Latin American Voter contains much more detailed analyses and discussions about the region as a whole and for specific countries than fit into this brief overview. For those interested in electoral behavior in the region, we encourage you to visit the press’ website at:

<https://www.press.umich.edu/8402589/latin-american-voter>.

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